

Kübler-Ross on Death and Dying: A Theological Critique
Chaplain (MAJ) Philip J. Secker, Th.D.

"Whose responsibility is it to inform the patient of his terminal illness?" "Should every terminally ill patient be told that he is dying?" "What should be done if the doctor refuses to tell the patient about his terminal illness?" "How do you come with a family who refuses to allow any mention of the terminal illness to the patient?" During the fourteen years since the publication of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' book, On Death and Dying, many professionals within the healing and helping professions as well as many other people have looked to Kübler-Ross for authoritative answers to these and other questions relating to the care of terminally ill patients. Kübler-Ross' lectures, seminars, workshops, articles and books have been widely acclaimed and her name has become virtually synonymous with the study of "death and dying."¹

¹
The phrase "death and dying" antedates Kübler-Ross' work, but has come into widespread use only since the publication of her book On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

Chaplain Secker is pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of New Ipswich, New Hampshire, and part-time lecturer in the Theology and Humanities Departments at St. Anselm's College in Manchester, New Hampshire. He served on active duty from 1968-71 and studied for his doctorate in the United States and in Europe.

Kübler-Ross has done pioneering work and most persons-- whether their interest is professional or personal or both-- will benefit greatly from her presentations and written works. The answers and advice which Kübler-Ross gives, however, are determined by her particular religious-philosophical views and values.² It is the thesis of this paper that some of Kübler-Ross' basic religious-philosophical views differ fundamentally from traditional Christian teachings. In order to support this thesis, a brief summary of some of Kübler-Ross' religious-philosophical views and values will be given. These views and values will then be contrasted with traditional Christian teachings as expressed in the Sacred Scriptures.

If the thesis of this paper is true, then Kübler-Ross' recommendations for helping terminally ill patients cannot be uncritically adopted by persons who seek to minister to them with the resources of the Christian tradition. Space limitations do not permit pointing out which of her many recommendations cannot be followed. Being aware of the contrast between Kübler-Ross' views and traditional Christian teachings, however, should assist readers in making their own determinations. If so, this paper will have achieved its purpose of contributing toward better care--within the Christian tradition--of terminally ill persons.

²
Kübler-Ross has described her career, at least in its inception, as a search for answers to "philosophical questions." To Live Until We Say Good-bye (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 19. I have used the term "religious-philosophical" because Kübler-Ross' underlying views and values seem to combine both religious and philosophical elements. See also note below.

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The Fear of Death

At the heart of Kübler-Ross' attitude toward death and dying and her recommendations for the care of terminally ill persons lies her belief about why it is that people fear death. Although she grants that some people fear death because it is beyond their control and understanding, Kübler-Ross insists that our "real fear" of death stems from "a view of death as a catastrophic destructive force and has ultimately to do with our own potential destructiveness."³ It is "basic knowledge," she asserts, "that in our unconscious death is never possible in regard to ourselves."⁴ "It is inconceivable," she adds, "for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our life here on earth."⁵ She explains these statements as follows:

I believe that the soul or spirit continues to live (after physical death) and it is conceivable that this is the reason why it is so difficult for us to conceive of our own death.⁶

³ Questions and Answers on Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

⁴ Ibid., p. 155. Cf. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Living With Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 18ff.

⁵ Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, p. 155. Cf. Living With Death and Dying, pp. 18ff.

⁶ Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, p. 155.

Our fear of death and our inability to admit the possibility of our own death are underlying factors in our death-denying culture.⁷

The Stages of Dying

Kübler-Ross believes that there are five stages that terminally ill persons, friends and family members and even therapists who are treating a terminally ill person may go through. They are: 1) shock and denial (the "no, not me" stage), 2) rage and anger (the "why me?" or "why now?" stage), 3) bargaining, 4) reactive⁸ depression and grief, and 5) "hopefully, ultimate acceptance."

Claiming that she does not attempt to impose her own "values and religious beliefs" on her patients, Kübler-Ross states that her goal is "accepting people where they are and being available when and if they are ready to move on to the next stage" of the dying process.⁹ Nevertheless, it is clear that Kübler-Ross believes that progress through the stages of dying is desirable and beneficial. She asserts, for example,

⁷ See note 11 below.

⁸ Living With Death and Dying, pp. 25ff. In Questions and Answers on Death and Dying the stages were listed as denial (after an initial reaction of shock), anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance (which might be followed by detachment), p. 264. A person can go through the stages in any order, be in more than one stage at a time, go through only one stage, reach stage five before becoming terminally ill, never go through stage two at all, etc. See Kübler-Ross' books for details.

⁹ Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, pp. 157 and 158.

that "the sooner we can accept the reality of our own death (sic), the sooner we can truly start living."¹⁰ Perhaps the clearest statement as to why Kübler-Ross believes that this is so is contained in the last chapter of Death: the Final Stage of Growth and is worth quoting at length:

There is no need to be afraid of death.

It is not the end of the physical body that should worry us. Rather, our concern must be to live while we're alive--to release our inner selves from the spiritual death that comes with living behind a facade designed to conform to external definitions of who and what we are.

Every individual human being born on this earth has the capacity to become a unique and special person unlike any who has ever existed before or will ever exist again. But to the extent that we become captives of culturally defined role expectations and behaviors--stereotypes, not ourselves,--we block our capacity for self-actualization. We interfere with our becoming all that we can be.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 157. Cf. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Others, Death: the Final Stage of Growth, edited by Joseph L. Braga and Laurie D. Braga (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 118.

Death is the key to the door of life. It is through accepting the finiteness of our individual existences that we are enabled to find the strength and courage to reject those extrinsic roles and expectations and to devote each day of our lives--however long they may be--to growing as fully as we are able. . . .

It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty, purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know that you must do. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile, each today is lost. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to¹¹ reach out to other human beings.

¹¹
Ibid., p. 164.

In summary, Kübler-Ross believes that consciously accepting the fact that we must die enables us to reject "culturally defined role expectations and behaviors" and to work toward self-actualization, that is, toward "becoming all that we can be."¹²

Religion Versus Authenticity

Success in working through the stages of death, Kübler-Ross contends, does not require "a specific belief in immortality." What is "more relevant" is "that whatever you are, whatever religious beliefs you have, you are genuine and authentic."¹³ Even the four "genuine, true atheists" Kübler-Ross worked with prior to the publication of Questions and Answers on Death and Dying died, Kübler-Ross states, with "amazing peace and acceptance, no different (sic) from a religious person."¹⁴

Intensely religious people, Kübler-Ross concedes, do accept death more easily than most others, but "only if they are authentic and have internalized their faith."¹⁵ "The significant variable," she argues,

is not what you believe, but how truly
and genuinely you believe. . . .

¹²

Ibid.

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Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, p. 159

¹⁴

Ibid.

¹⁵

Ibid., p. 161.

Only the few true genuine (sic) religious people have accepted death with great peace and equanimity, but in our counseling we have seen very few of these people, because we are usually called for consultations to those patients who are troubled. I would say that about 95 percent of our patients that we have studied have been a little bit religious, but not¹⁶ genuine and authentic.

To summarize, Kübler-Ross believes that it is desirable for people to overcome their fear of death and for each to accept the reality of his or her own death. For this to happen, it is not important "what you believe, but how truly and genuinely you believe."¹⁷

Life's Work

In the years since the publication of her early books, Kübler-Ross has developed increased sensitivity to the true needs of¹⁸ patients, relatives,¹⁹ and other therapists²⁰ and has put greater emphasis on the importance of the therapist being aware of his

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Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁷

See note 16.

¹⁸

To Live Until We Say Good-bye, pp. 31, 48f.

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Living With Death and Dying, pp. 22f., 46f.

²⁰

Ibid., p. 168.

or her own needs and fears.²¹ On the matters described above, however, Kübler-Ross' position appears to have remained constant. "Fear and guilt," she insists, "are the only enemies of man."²² She urges people to have the courage to face their own fears and guilts and unfinished business²³ and to "externalize their negative feelings in order to find peace."²⁴ Quoting one of her teachers who said, "Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you would never see the beauty of their carvings," Kübler-Ross states:

It has been our life's work to help our patients view a terminal illness not as a destructive, negative force, but as one of the windstorms in life that will enhance their own inner growth and will help them to emerge as beautiful as the canyons which have been battered for centuries.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., pp. 16f, 25f.

²² To Live Until We Say Good-bye, p. 12.

²³ Ibid., pp. 12 and 155. The phrase "unfinished business" appears with increasing frequency in Kübler-Ross' more recent books.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 12f., cf. p. 155.

The Christian View of Faith and Death

For Kübler-Ross fear and guilt are "the only enemies of man."²⁶ Death, in contrast, is "the final stage of growth."²⁷ Kübler-Ross' goal is to accept people where they are and be available when and if they are ready to move on to the next stage including, "hopefully," acceptance of the reality of death so that the patient can die in "great peace and equanimity."²⁸ Death, in Kübler-Ross' view, has become almost friendly.

The Sacred Scriptures of the Christian tradition present a different view of death. Death is connected with sin.²⁹

"The Old Testament," Alan Richardson asserts, does not encourage the sentimental notion that death is "natural," a necessary and beneficial aspect of the ordering of nature; on the contrary, death is evil (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19), bitter (1 Samuel 15:32), horrific (Psalm 55:4f); in short, it is unnatural,³⁰ though the Bible does not know this expression.

²⁶ See note 22 above.

²⁷ See note 11 above.

²⁸ See note 16 above.

²⁹ "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19. "The soul that sins shall die." Ezekiel 18:20. "The wages of sin is death." Romans 6: 23. All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946 and 1952).

³⁰ "Death," A Theological Word Book of the Bible, edited by Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 60.

In the New Testament death is called "the last enemy."³¹
 When St. Paul cries out, "O death, where is thy victory?
 O death, where is thy sting?" the answer given is not that
 they are gone, but ^{that} "The sting of death is sin."³² Jesus,
 facing his own imminent suffering and death said in the Gar-
 den of Gethsemane, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to
 death,"³³ and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this
 cup pass from me."³⁴ On the cross, far from accepting his
 death with "peace and equanimity," He cried out, "My God,
 my God, why have you forsaken me?"³⁵

The Christian Understanding of Faith

The Sacred Scriptures also differ from Kübler-Ross in their
 understanding of faith. For Kübler-Ross what is important
 "is not what you believe, but how truly and genuinely you be-
 lieve."³⁶ The Sacred Scripture, however, nowhere advocate or
 approve of such a fideism or faith in faith itself. On the
 contrary, the content of faith is of critical importance.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 15:26.

³² 1 Corinthians 15:55f.

³³ Matthew 26:38.

³⁴ Matthew 26:39.

³⁵ Matthew 26:46.

³⁶ See note 16 above.

This fact is evident in the First Commandment and its preamble:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you
out of the land of Egypt, out of the house
of bondage. You shall have no other gods
before me.³⁷

This concern for the content of faith is also evident in the
Shema of Deuteronomy,³⁸ in St. Peter's confession³⁹ and in
what may be the earliest New Testament creed, "Jesus is Lord."⁴⁰

Conclusion

Kübler-Ross and the Sacred Scriptures, therefore, are poles
apart in their understanding of death and faith. For Kübler-
Ross death is simply a natural, physical process that the
dying person ought to accept as such with "peace and equanim-
ity." Faith is an aid in achieving this acceptance, but the
content of one's faith is irrelevant. According to the Sacred
Scriptures, death is never merely a fact of life that is to
be calmly accepted but "the last enemy" which is to be over-
come through the victory of faith in Jesus Christ. Now "neither
life nor death. . . nor anything else in all creation" will be
able to separate those who trust in Christ "from the love of
God which is in Christ Jesus" the Lord.⁴¹

³⁷ Exodus 20:2-3.

³⁸ Deuteronomy 6:5f.

³⁹ Matthew 16:16.

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:3

⁴¹ Romans 8:38f.

Christians, therefore, rather than wanting to assist people to calm acceptance of death through some kind of undefined faith in faith itself, will seek to comfort people facing death with the good news that God in Christ has overcome death for them so that even in the midst of what the Christian tradition has called "the terrors of death" they can confidently trust in the one who said, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life."⁴² Kübler-Ross, in portraying death as almost friendly, has not only failed to transcend our death-denying culture, but has shown herself to be captive to it. Even the phrase "death and dying" which she popularized, may subtly suggest that death can in some way be avoided or replaced by a process labeled "dying." Kübler-Ross' recent involvement in the "life after life" movement is a further indication of her failure to transcend our death-denying culture. Thus, although much can be learned from her, Christians, at least, cannot look to Kübler-Ross for authoritative answers on how to minister to persons who are terminally ill.⁴³

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Revelation 2:10.

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It is perhaps significant that Kübler-Ross has been notably unsuccessful in "reaching" physicians who have been out of medical school for two or more years. "After about two years of residency," Kübler-Ross laments, teaching "the art of medicine and the care of the dying patients" to these doctors "becomes almost hopeless." (Questions and Answers on Death and Dying, p. 137). It may be that these doctors are more aware of the reality of death than "the death and dying lady" is. (On the title, "the death and dying lady," see Death: The Final Stage of Growth, pp. xif.)

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